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Country - Colombia

Subject - Events Leading Up to Coup d'etat by General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla/First Results of Coup.

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1. Around 1 June 1953 the proposed new constitution for Colombia was published. The Constituent Assembly was to convene on 15 June. The government permitted discussion of the proposed constitution. Up through 13 June, one could read the pros and cons.
2. The cons referred chiefly to the fact that indefinite control of the Government by the present "ins" was greatly facilitated by such Articles as No. 13, which read: "Any Colombian, even though he may have given up his nationality, who should be caught with arms in hand fighting against Colombia, or who in foreign lands should be guilty of acts which tend to dishonor the Republic, or who should engage in subversive activities against the regime, or who verbally or in writing should attempt against the prestige of the authorities or institutions of the country will be judged and punished as a traitor."
3. Or they referred to Article 33, which said that in case of "disturbance of public order"--not in case of "war" as is presently the law--property could be expropriated without indemnization.
4. Objections would probably have continued to be voiced concerning the officially approved text for a new Constitution if the Government had continued to push for its ratification; however, the Government did not have a chance. Events which occurred on Saturday, 13 June, changed the picture completely.
5. At 10:00 A.M. that day, nominal President Laureano Gomez attended a cabinet meeting called by Acting President Roberto Urdaneta Arbelaez, and requested that a Decree be issued retiring General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla as head of the Army, because he disagreed with a certain public order. Minister of War, Lucio Pabon Nunez objected to this step and said to Gomez, "I admire you and respect you as a father, but I am not in accord." Acting President Urdaneta likewise expressed his objection to removing Rojas.

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6. Laureano Gomez then placed his fist on the table and said, "I reassume the Presidency of the Republic."
7. There was no objection. Urdaneta told Gomez that if such was his wish, he was within his rights. And the Ministers, in order to give Gomez a free hand, all resigned. With one exception they left the Palace. Jorge Leyva was the exception. Until that moment he was Minister of Public Works. Shortly afterwards he departed, carrying in his pocket Laureano Gomez's first Decree after returning to power--a Decree naming him Minister of War. The second Presidential signature appeared on a document retiring Rojas Pinilla and appointing General Regulo Gaitan Patino as new head of the armed forces.
8. Meanwhile, however, a plane of the Colombian Air Force had taken off from Bogota bound for Girardot, and on a nearby Tolima farm the deposed General Rojas set out to catch this ship, returning to Bogota.
10. When Leyva, accompanied by General Gaitan, General Mariano Ospina Rodriguez and Colonel Willy Holman, tried to enter the gate at Army headquarters in Bogota, the guard stopped them. Leyva explained, "I am the new Minister of War and I ask you to report that I come to be recognized." An officer appeared and replied, "I have orders to arrest you." It was 1:30 in the afternoon. From that moment Leyva knew the Army had assumed control of the situation.
11. Then, later, when ex-Minister of Government Luis Ignacio Andrade appeared at the President's Palace, he was advised by some of his fellow Party men that "General Rojas Pinilla has assumed charge." Actually, this was not the case. Rojas had assumed command of the armed forces, and these were the ones who took charge of the situation. The citizens of Bogota, who read in the afternoon papers the news about Laureano Gomez's return to the Presidency, had no idea of what was happening, although all the strategic points of the city were in Army control and numerous military patrols went and came through the streets.
12. Things had developed fast. At 5:00 PM Rojas Pinilla was in the President's Palace talking to ex-President Urdaneta. He told him that, in view of the turn of events, he should reoccupy the job. Urdaneta replied that this was not possible while Gomez was nominally President. Then came Rojas Pinilla's sensational answer, "As the Nation cannot remain without a Government and someone must govern, I assume power."

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13. An endless parade of people began to arrive at the Palace. The sentinels had a hard time stopping those who were extremely enthusiastic but had no business there. Inside, soldiers and civilians congratulated each other and slapped one another's backs in the good old Latin "abrazo." They all wanted to drink toasts, and even ordered the Palace butler to bring liquor, but the wine cellar was empty.
14. At about midnight Rojas Pinilla addressed the whole country by radio. In his speech, these words were significant: "No more blood, no more depredations in the name of any political party, no more squabbling among the sons of the same immortal Colombia! Peace, law, liberty, justice for all without distinctions and preferably for the classes least favored by fortune ... The armed forces will remain in power while the necessary conditions are established for holding pure elections ..."
15. Unless one has lived in Colombia during these last few years, it is difficult to understand the joy which the majority of the people here have experienced with the taking over of the Government by the military. The regime will continue to be Conservative. Rojas Pinilla is a Conservative, and so are the members of the Cabinet appointed by him. But the more reasonable group of Conservatives are in power; the violent, unbending ones are out. The Liberals, therefore, although they are not expecting to get control of anything for a long time, do, nevertheless, feel that they will be given a fairer chance.
16. It is just one small incident, but this reflects the new day. I happened to be in [redacted] over the eventful week end, and Sunday night [redacted] was to come to dinner at the hotel. Shortly after dark he called to say that he would not be able to join us and would explain in the morning. The later explanation was that he had seen a crowd of people milling in the street shouting "vivas" for the Liberal Party and the Army and "abajos" for Laureano Gomez. His natural assumption was, therefore, based on previous experience, that shots would soon be fired and the town would shortly be under a curfew. So he had better stay home. His fears were unfounded. Nothing happened. Nobody beat the crowd down. They eventually got tired of marching and went home.
17. The Constituent Assembly met as scheduled on June 15th. They elected Mariano Ospina Perez as presiding officer, they legalized the title to the Presidency of General Rojas Pinilla, and they adjourned for 60 days in order to study further the proposed reforms to the Constitution.

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18. On 17 June, Laureano Gomez and his family left Colombia peacefully for New York. (His newspaper, El Siglo, did not appear for a couple of days after he was ousted.)
19. Reports from many sides are that bandits are laying down their arms and that refugees from the land are returning to their farms. The new Government has offered a certain amnesty to the guerillas, although this has not yet been fully clarified.
20. Leaders of the Liberal Party are speaking up again. Some of the exiled chiefs have returned to Colombia, and a Party Convention will be held in the near future to elect officers and define a policy.
21. The Conservative Party must now reorganize too, and straighten out the mess of their Directorate, previously dominated by Laureano Gomez's men.
22. Another member of the fallen regime, Jorge Leyva, left the country without difficulty, but we have heard nothing about the arch-Conservative Luis Ignacio Andrade. His name has disappeared from the news.
23. In resume, we are enjoying a period of great good feeling that has not yet faded.
24. The only note of alarm expressed is that the Army might become so satisfied with its position that it will not want to turn loose the reins when the time comes at the end of the actual presidential term next year. But, even then, most people would rather have a continued military dictatorship than the state of affairs existing up to June 13th.
25. There is very little economic news of any sort, except that the change in Government is expected to have a tremendously good effect on business. Everyone is optimistic. It may be premature to judge, but as an example, our XXXXXX Shop, which controls a territory horribly affected by violence and which has had miserable results this year, came through last week with 69 sales, when its average so far this year has been 28.

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